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State loses brucellosis-free status

By Michael Tucker, staff writer

Officials: Park County cow tests positive Monday; loss could cost ranchers millions

The unthinkable has happened — again. A member of a Montana cattle herd has tested positive for brucellosis, the second time in just over a year the disease has been found in cattle in the state.

This time, though, the consequences of the positive test will come home to roost on the doorsteps of all Montana cattle producers, as it means the state's coveted brucellosis-free certification will be revoked.

The loss of the state's brucellosis-free status could cost state ranchers millions after a cow in the Paradise Valley tested positive for the disease, the Montana Department of Livestock said Monday.

The National Animal Disease Center confirmed the presence of brucellosis, livestock officials wrote in a press release.

The state will be downgraded to Class A status, which means livestock producers will now be required to test bulls and non-spayed females 18-months of age or older, 30 days prior to interstate travel, said John Youngberg, vice-president of governmental affairs for Montana Farm Bureau Federation.

The state will be downgraded in four to eight weeks, or as soon as the downgrade can be listed in the Federal Register, DOL said.

What triggered the status loss was a brucellosis outbreak that occurred last May near the town of Bridger, Youngberg said. Under federal rules, Montana had to remain brucellosis free for two years after the original finding last year.

The state may apply again for class-free status next May, provided no more additional cases surface, DOL said.

But applying for a clean bill of health is different from having one in hand, former Montana Cattleman's Association president Dennis McDonald said. Both Wyoming and Idaho were stripped of the brucellosis-free status in years past and it took two years for those states to secure the title.

"It will take us at least two years and that's assuming there are no further cases," he said.

Montana's removal from the list could cost the \$2.2 billion-per-year industry \$3.5 to 7 million in additional testing costs, Youngberg said.

"For (a) commercial operator who spays heifers and sells steers, it doesn't mean a whole lot," he said. "The guys it really hurts are the seed stock people — the Angus ranches and Hereford ranches — who ship cattle all over the United States and the world. It's going to make a difference to them."

Other states may impose their own restrictions on top of the federal requirement, Youngberg said.

"They will require testing and start requiring all of the things we would do to them if they had brucellosis," he said.

The Paradise Valley cow had been vaccinated twice and the rest of the herd has tested negative, State Veterinarian Marty Zaluski said.

The regular testing was part of an extensive disease surveillance plan due to the potential heightened transmission risks from wildlife to cattle, according to Montana Stockgrowers Association officials. The individualized plans call for increased testing, vaccination and wildlife surveillance. U.S. Department of Agriculture officials will begin testing to determine the extent and the scope of the outbreak, Youngberg said. Currently, neighboring ranches are being tested and the original herd will likely be quarantined.

“What’s unfortunate is those people over in the Paradise Valley have taken this pretty seriously,” he said. “They have a pretty rigorous self-imposed herd management plan ... These people did it by the book and then some and still have this case.”

Last year, the discovery of brucellosis in seven Montana cattle tested at a Iowa feedlot sent federal and state officials scrambling to determine if cattle from any other herds were infected. The state had 60 days to ensure the disease was isolated to the Bridger herd. If cattle from another ranch had tested positive or if the task could not have been completed in time, the state would have lost its coveted brucellosis-free status. More than 2,500 head were tested during that time.

What’s different now is the status is automatically gone, McDonald said.

“Unlike before where we were all holding our breath hoping that another positive would not be located, it’s a different situation this time around,” he said. “For my family, we were planning to ship cattle tomorrow.”

The status loss sparked finger pointing among those involved, including Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who has advocated a deal with USDA for a split-state status for the area immediately surrounding Yellowstone National Park. The measure would require increased testing in the area and would allow the rest of the state to keep a clean bill of health.

“Unfortunately, this is what I feared, and what I predicted,” Schweitzer said in a written statement. “We discussed this with USDA and negotiated a path toward split-state status.”

But MSGA officials, who opposed the move, said in a written statement Monday the lengthy process would not have been in place since the last outbreak in May.

“Split-state status could not have prevented this transmission,” Rice said. “First, there is no way the state of Montana could have fulfilled the requirements for split-state status in time for this incident.”

But McDonald said something has to be done around Yellowstone National Park. The MCA supporting the governor’s plan.

MSGA “opposed any change to the management plan like a buffer zone around the park or split-state status,” he said. “And now, through no fault of their own, cattle producers in Wisdom and Wibaux, in Ekalaka and Eureka and everywhere in between will be harmed. This is going to be significant. It will be a multi-million-dollar annual number.”

Yellowstone Park has long been a hot bed for brucellosis, and cattlemen are calling on federal agencies to step up, McDonald said.

“This will be a continuing problem for cattlemen in all of the surrounding states,” he said.

Brucellosis is a highly contagious disease that causes cows to abort and may cause future breeding problems like sterility and miscarriages, according to the USDA. It is mainly spread by birthing matter and aborted

fetuses. The disease can remain on vegetation for up to a month in wet and cool conditions.

Also, the bacteria can lay latent in other areas of the cow besides the reproductive tract, the USDA said. Brucellosis can lay in wait in lymph nodes or other glands. If a cow tests negative, it could test positive later in 30 to 120 days.

The presence of brucellosis is not a public health risk to consumers, livestock officials said.